

# Leadership Strategies of Successful Women-Owned Businesses in Cameroon

Ntoko Henry Ajieh\*

General Manager, Presprint PLC, Cameroon. Email: paphenry@yahoo.com\*

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## ABSTRACT

Lack of leadership skills in women led businesses can result in high business failure rates. Women business owners who do not know how to improve their leadership skills could face difficulties in succeeding in business. Grounded in the transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies that women business owners in the events planning business use to improve leadership skills to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The study participants included 5 women in the events planning business in Cameroon, Central Africa who have successfully developed the strategies needed to improve leadership skills to succeed in business beyond 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, publicly available documents, and observations of participants' business facilities. Yin's 5-step data analysis process was used to analyze the data. Three themes emerged: embracing leadership attributes, acquiring leadership capabilities, and conceptualizing the playing field.

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership; Women entrepreneurs; Entrepreneurial skills; Leadership strategies; Small business sustainability; and the Event's planning industry.

## Introduction

The event planning business is a revenue and employment source in local economies (Heesterman 2016). Kim and Dombrosky (2016) emphasized the importance of events planning when they postulated that the creation and management of events attract visitors who spend money, thereby boosting economic growth.

However, some women entrepreneurs fail in managing business ventures (Yang & Triana, 2017). According to Goswami (2019) women entrepreneurs face challenges in starting and running their own business because of a lack of leadership skills.

Women own and manage approximately 50% of businesses in sub-Saharan Africa (Chinomona & Kwame, 2015). However, the specific business problem is that is that some women business owners in the events planning business lack strategies to improve leadership skills to succeed in business. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that women business owners in the events planning business use to improve leadership skills to succeed in business beyond 5 years.

## Event Planning Business

The International Institute of Events Management (IITEM) in 2018 defined events planning as the process of managing a project such as a meeting, tradeshow, ceremonies, parties, and conventions. The events planning process involves budgeting, setting timelines, transportation, developing themes, acquiring permits, arranging transport, organizing logistics, and arranging for equipment and facilities.

Event planning requires different skills, which include organization, multitasking, creativity, and adaptability. Events planning expert Hard (2018) stated that the fundamental skills necessary for good event planners are verbal and written communication skills, organizational time management, project management, and multitasking.

Women entrepreneurs need to understand the complexity of their events planning business and then acquire the necessary leadership skill sets to solve problems to remain sustainable.

### Women Entrepreneurship

**Women become entrepreneurs because of their desire to be independent, flexible, and economically self-reliant. In 2016, 163 million women started businesses across the globe (Jackson, 2017).** According to Yang and Triana (2017), women-led businesses have high failure rates. Atsan (2016) **stated** entrepreneurial failure occurs when an entrepreneur underperforms and fails to achieve desired targets. Almahry et al. (2018) noted women entrepreneurs fail because of a lack of technical skills, business management skills, and personal entrepreneurial skills. After researching women entrepreneurship, Yadav and Unni (2016) concluded that women in developing countries lack access to resources to start entrepreneurial ventures. As a result of these disadvantages, women-led businesses could have high failure rates.

### **Barriers Encountered by Women Entrepreneurs**

Women entrepreneurs often face constraints in their business ventures. According to Garg and Agarwal (2017), women entrepreneurs suffer financial constraints in obtaining credit from banks. Garg and Agarwal added that women entrepreneurs find difficulties in capital expansion, finding appropriate financial resources, and collateral bank loans. Lack of collateral limits accesses to formal capital (Li. et al., 2019). Goswami (2019) noted besides access to capital, women entrepreneurs find challenges in starting and running their own business because of a lack of entrepreneurial leadership skills, inadequate education, and family ties. Women entrepreneurs who lack such skills may too often find it challenging to provide the leadership required to develop and sustain a business beyond 5 years.

### **Entrepreneurial Leadership Skills**

Entrepreneurial leadership is a leadership style that integrates leadership and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial leadership is a distinctive leadership style suitable for new and small businesses rather than large business organizations (Leitch & Volery, 2017). Entrepreneurial leaders are team-oriented, committed to the values that strengthen the organizational culture, motivated, charismatic, and cognitive abilities allow them to evaluate opportunities, discover and create new ventures, and grow their businesses (Ranjan, 2018). Panda (2018) found that some entrepreneurial women lacked formal business and leadership training. Similarly, in a study finding, Sadera et al. (2019) noted that though women entrepreneurs were good in oral communication, but they lacked the necessary leadership skills to promote and establish their businesses. **Developing women's entrepreneurial leadership skills could unleash the full potential of women entrepreneurs, which could impact the growth of women-owned businesses in the African continent.**

### **Education**

Education is a significant contributor to business success. Women entrepreneurs lack the necessary knowledge to develop their own business because of technological challenges and localization (Amador-Ruiz & Briones-Penalver, 2017). Many women in developing countries are illiterate, live in poor communities, and are

ill-equipped financially. Women are also not familiar with the business landscape and do not know where to access resources (Iwu & Nxopo, 2015). Women could learn the necessary entrepreneurial skills and knowledge to acquire resources to run a sustainable business.

### **Family Ties**

Many entrepreneurial women in developing countries need to balance family responsibilities with business activities. Rai (2018) researched the issues and challenges of women entrepreneurs in India. Rai claimed that women did not invest adequate time in business to fulfill their family responsibilities, which hindered their business growth. Iwu and Nxopo (2015) added that these women often worked part-time to meet family responsibilities. Meyer (2018) stated that in many cultures, women who own businesses are responsible for home tasks and parenting, restricting them from devoting needed time for business, thereby hindering business sustainability and growth. Kwame, Asare-Yeboah et al. (2018) found that most of the female entrepreneurs involved in the study noted that their family responsibilities affected their ability to spend the needed time for the business. Learning skills such as work-life balance could help women entrepreneurs in charge of the family household responsibilities.

### **Strategies for Developing Entrepreneurial Leadership Skills**

Entrepreneurial leaders are authentic, charismatic, and lead by developing a vision and setting goals for their business ventures. Arguments exist among researchers whether leadership is an inherent ability or an acquired skill. In an exploratory article on the myth of born leadership, Steinhoff (2015) asserted that some leaders are naturally born; however, very little literature supports this concept. Khoshhal and Guraya (2016) stated that leadership is more of an experience and expertise that leaders learn to develop over time. Steinhoff (2015) opined that innate leadership characteristics within an individual could manifest only when developed or cultivated.

### **Leadership learning**

The business operating environment is rapidly changing, and leaders need a different and broader set of skills to increase their business acumen and adaptability. Leadership development through on job training is about increasing an individual's capacity to integrate within an organization's system and perform to meet organizational goals (Aldulaimi, 2018), which is essential for business continuity. After researching the significance of informal (on the job) learning, Choonara et al. (2017) found that workplace-based learning is an informal learning approach in which an individual could respond to changing circumstances in the workplace through practice. Through informal learning at the workplace, people could acquire knowledge and skills embedded in business practice (Amelia et al., 2015)

### **Followship**

Followership is an engagement process to improve organizational success. The dynamic process of followership enables both the leaders and followers to influence each other. Joubert and Feldman (2017) described followership as the capability of a leader to provide content-specific and context-specific information to followers, enabling them to meet organizational purposes. Followership is complementary to leadership because followers could influence leaders through decision-making, which could improve a leader's competencies (Sotiroska et al., 2019).

Blair and Bligh (2018) concluded that the quality of the relationship between followers and leaders is essential in improving team participation. Participation could enable followers to frequently demonstrate leadership skills through their willingness to voice innovative or divergent ideas. Creative ideas could result in developing new products and services or enhance the process for business longevity 5 years and beyond.

### **Mentorship**

Mentorship is an effective method of transferring entrepreneurial knowledge, leadership skills, and attributes. Moore and Wang (2017) described mentorship as a socially based learning process between mentors and mentees. Montgomery (2017) viewed mentorship as one of the significant factors in skills development and career advancement, leading to performance improvement.

Mentoring is a training program as mentorship enables professional and personal development (Irby et al., 2017). Kunaka and Moos (2019) emphasized the importance of mentorship in developing leadership skills. Through mentorship, entrepreneurs and small business owners could build leadership skills to help them grow sustainable businesses.

Mentoring can take many forms. McBride et al. (2017) noted that mentoring could be in the way of supporting, training, counseling, coaching, advising, protecting, and sponsoring. Hund et al. (2018) identified important aspects of active mentorship, including listening, respect, excellent communication, patience, and honesty. Montgomery (2017) believed that mentorship could improve people's self-efficiency, efficacy, and competency. Small business owners in the event planning business could provide appropriate mentoring to employees to enhance trust and, in return, obtain their commitment to organizational success beyond 5 years.

### **Networking**

Networking is an action to create and manage a social network system that provides access to resources for everyone's mutual benefit. Hartviksen et al. (2018) concluded that learning networks result in a leadership capacity through harnessing a shared consciousness of purpose, understanding, trust, and respect for everyone in the network. Brown (2019) asserted that networking could result in an avenue through which people could collaborate to build new leadership skills. Turkina (2017) argued that networking fosters business growth by generating knowledge spillovers. Therefore, networking could help leaders to acquire new knowledge over time for business growth and sustainability.

### **Research Methodology and Design**

In this qualitative study with case study design, the population consisted of 5 women who have a minimum of 5 years of experience in the events planning business, have successfully sustained their events planning business beyond 5 years, and are female business entrepreneurs who started their events planning business. A qualitative approach is suitable to understand a phenomenon through participants' perspectives (Barnham, 2015). Using case study design supports in-depth inquiries into a phenomenon within its real-life setting and allows researchers to ask participants what, when, and why questions (Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Therefore, case study design under qualitative method was appropriate for this study.

## Summary of Finding and Discussions

The sources of data were semi-structured interviews and company documents provided by the participants. Yin's (2017) five-step data analysis process resulted in three emerging themes. The identified themes are a) embracing leadership attributes, b) acquiring leadership capabilities, and c) conceptualizing the playing field. The strategies identified in each theme are within the realm of the transformational leadership theory, which is the conceptual framework of this research.

### Embracing Leadership Attributes

The subthemes under theme 1 are understanding leadership, leadership attributes, and training and education. According to the participants, people could not act in a leadership capacity if they didn't understand the meaning of leadership. Participants said that to adjust and manage unfamiliar situations, female business leaders need skills, tools, and experience, and these are attainable leadership attributes. The leadership attributes are not limited to CEOs or executives, and anyone could exhibit them; for example, by asking questions that no one is asking in a group meeting, presenting ideas, helping others at work, and standing out in the crowd.

The four pillars or attributes of leadership that could result in uniqueness and belongingness are engagement, accountability, courage, and humility. The participant said to succeed, women business owners in the events planning business need to engage people to do their job right and excel. Engagement makes subordinates or followers feel included as team players, resulting in innovation. Participants noted engaging people by sharing information, providing needed support, and investing in the team through training, development, and advancement. The social interactions improve employee engagement at work. According to participant, company leaders have an added responsibility to support social interactions outside work.

The participant noted that the leaders engage their employees through centralized access to tools, knowledge sharing, and a digital workforce. The leaders could engage employees by making them part of decision-making. According to the participant, employees' involvement could influence managerial actions and enable leaders to capture ideas and solve logistical challenges in the events planning process.

Accountability is about building confidence, acting responsibly, and getting the job done. The participant stated that leaders need to hold people accountable to complete the task within an allocated time frame when assigning tasks. The participant suggested not to do the task for followers but expect them to immerse in the process and get it done. The management team enlists leadership skills by enforcing accountability by valuing employees at work. According to the participant, women leaders in their events planning business enlist value through recognition, appreciation, praise, and treating followers respectfully.

All participants noted having a culture of accountability. Events planning constitutes different types of activities, and each of these activities requires some degree of accountability and, therefore, suggested leaders be vigilant. The participant noted that individual accountability and organizational accountability and leaders need to have explicit knowledge of the business process to fulfill both accountabilities.

Courage, another leadership attribute, is about stepping out of the comfort zone, taking a calculated risk, embracing diversity, acting as a role model, and letting go of stereotypes. According to the participant, courage is about acting

on convictions and principles while taking a risk. The participant said that courage is enlisting and inspiring trust. Courage is intentional behavior in goal-seeking pursuits. According to the participant, the business leaders carry out weekly training and group exercises to help employees develop courage. The business leaders take leadership roles, volunteer, and take the initiative in strategy development to demonstrate courage. The participant noted that courage is about a character to capture peoples' trust, deal with losses, and become part of a larger mission.

Courage is telling the truth and transparency. According to the participant, employees have a voice, and the leaders respect employees' voices. Putting it in other words, the participant said courage means not ignoring the elephant in the room. According to the participant, in their company, leaders watch their language to reveal attitudes, talk about positive things, and emphasize solutions to problems rather than dwell on the problem itself. The company leaders receive training on how to prepare emotionally and mentally to take a risk. The company leaders routinely bring outside consultants to train employees on goal setting, risk-taking, building communication skills, and strategic and contingency planning.

Two participants pointed to humility as essential leadership attributes. All leaders make mistakes, but acknowledging mistakes, fixing them, and avoiding similar future mistakes shows humility. And according to the participant, humility is a willingness to learn from others. Humility is also about sharing weaknesses and limitations with followers and listening. The participants agreed that humility shows the humble side, which encourages followers to share ideas. The company leaders should receive training on developing humility, and training constitutes being open to surroundings, transparency, and openness. The participant said to be open to others, and leaders should seek inputs from others because no person has all the answers.

The leaders need to welcome criticism, give employees some freedom, listen, and show respect. The participant also emphasized providing supporting work environments and providing them the tools to do the job. The performance improves when people see their leaders looking out for their best interests.

The participant suggested accepting ambiguity. The leaders should not be over-controlling, and they need to know when to take charge and when to let go or delegate. The participant suggested keeping journals to self-reflection. The participant added writing journals could enhance a leader's perception, learn from their actions, and provide an opportunity for improvement. Humility could result in self-awareness, build confidence as followers may be aware of the self-assurance entrusted to them, and improve the leaders' image.

### **Acquiring leadership Capabilities**

The subthemes under theme 2 are adaptive capabilities, avoiding stereotypes and biases, and a leadership development plan. In the literature, scholars describe leadership qualities as understanding, compassion, managing conflicts, good communication skills, and the ability to relate with others.

According to the participant, simply possessing these qualities does not make one a leader. One needs all these qualities to be a good husband or a wife or raise a teenage child, but what matters in the business arena is how one applies these qualities to solve problems.

The participant stated that leaders need to consider three things to solve problems: one's strength related to leadership attributes, the tools or media to implement these attributes, and the nature of the problem itself. The



nature of the problem or challenge determines the type of leadership attributes needed and the access to a medium to apply these attributes.

Leaders with adaptive capabilities are adaptive leaders. According to the participant, to acquire leadership capabilities, one must possess uniqueness and belongingness. The participant added that uniqueness stands out from the crowd, which entails a leader's distinct personality, and approaches valued by others. Then, belongingness is about others' perceptions of being part of them. When asked how adaptive leaders make others follow, the participant shared a concept that she learned.

Adaptive leaders have pleasing personalities that intrigue followers. According to the participant, to implement a leader's plan in the workplace, in the beginning, a leader needs a first follower whom they have to embrace as an equal. With that kind of mindset, leaders act is not about them anymore; it is about them. The participant added that together with the first follower, a leader could attract more people to follow and as more people join, others who are watching and observing also join the team to avoid being an outcast.

Leadership capabilities require an adaptive mindset because adaptive challenges have no established solutions. The participant added that teams are becoming more diverse in nationalism, ethnicity, or religion, and not all operate in the same standards. A positive outlook from a leader embraces diversity and builds an inclusive culture where everyone operates or functions at the same standard. Therefore, according to the participant, adaptive leaders do not alienate people, are open to ideas, and make people feel included.

Everyone has some unconscious bias: positive, negative, accurate, or wrong. Participants noted that bias could result from stereotypes, which could distort leaders and misrepresent reality. The participants suggested critical self-reflection and pushing back personal bias, and asking others to do the same in the organization. The participant opined the need to be vocal on diversity as such action would amplify the message when done repeatedly by the leaders and others within the business.

All participants discussed using a personal leadership development plan as everyone could be adaptive leaders. When asked to elaborate on becoming an adaptive leader, the participant said that business owners need to identify leaders from the present time or the past that they admire. These leaders could be from the workplace or personal life. Then the participant suggested searching the leader's attributes (engagement, accountability, courage, and humility) that one admires and try understanding how these leaders applied these attributes in their work or life.

Business leaders need feasible short-term and long-term goals. Leaders need to familiarize themselves with a task they plan to accomplish to meet their short-term and long goals. The participant suggested writing a statement regarding the long-term goals and post it on the office wall as a constant reminder of what one plans to accomplish. The participant further suggested deciding what leaders need to do this week, next week, and a month to meet their short-term goal. The participant also stated long-term planning by determining the foundation leaders need to set this week, next three or six months to meet their long-term goal.

All participants suggested to self-reflect personal biases to ensure it does not interject in their tasks. Then participants recommended to integrate four pillars of leadership: engagement, accountability, courage, and humility in daily actions.

### Conceptualizing the Playing Field

The subthemes under theme 3 are adaptive challenges, past experiences, and understanding the business landscape. Leadership fails because people do not realize the true essence of leadership. Therefore, participants described leadership from their perspective and stated that leadership is not about personal abilities, neither are the tools and instruments used in practicing leadership. The participant said, “Though these are important, leadership is meeting tough challenges to get work done.” The participant explained leadership with an example of pottery. A ceramist uses hands (action) and tools to build a sculpture in pottery. That action resembles experience and knowledge in a business context, and tools could be leadership attributes such as accountability, courage, engagement, and humility. Action alone does not define leadership, nor do the tools, but building sculpture does. Therefore, according to the participant, “Leadership is how a ceramist handles adaptive challenges to build that fine piece of sculpture.”

In business, leaders face adaptive challenges and functional challenges. According to the participant, functional challenges rest within people of authority, and they use existing know-how processes or techniques to solve problems. The participant provided an example to differentiate between functional challenges and adaptive changes. If the network is down in the data center, it could be a functional challenge, which leaders could fix it using existing know-how techniques. A manager needs to know the difference between functional and adaptive challenges to be a good leader. According to the participant, adaptive challenges lie within people and require a new methodology and approach to business. The participant said that the adaptive challenges could be when a company decides to update the entire technological infrastructure with new software and devices and assisting people to give up something they find comfortable and adjust to change.

The participant said that functional challenges could be solved through managerial expertise, whereas adaptive challenges require building capacities. The participant noted that the management team routinely carries live and virtual classes to improve technical and problem-solving skills and develop employees' adaptive mindsets. Employees receive training on influencing followers, peers, and supervisors by identifying the business challenges and developing solutions. The participants noted training in change management through human resource personnel and change experts on organizational design, organizational justice, and emotional intelligence to develop an adaptive mindset. Many leaders fail to distinguish between functional and adaptive challenges. They apply functional solutions to adaptive challenges or vice versa. The participant recommended person-job fit with experience to manage adaptive challenges and suggested leadership exercises, broadening the mindset through training from professional consultants to develop adaptive capabilities.

The participant said that the best approach to build leadership capabilities is by using ourselves as the case. Using experience as a case could enable a leader to evaluate one's strengths and weaknesses. According to the participant, experience, both favorable and unfavorable, could be a good teacher. Leaders could acquire leadership skills through practice. In participating 's company, training includes leaders visiting their past experiences at work and visualizing how they could have operated differently or trying to understand how things would have turned out if they knew then what they know now. The participant recommended keeping a reflective journal to reflect on past experiences.



Dotting down activities and challenges could assist a business owner in planning the next event effectively. Many leaders fail because of their inability to diagnose a problem. A wrong diagnosis of the problem could result in the wrong solution. The participant noted that business leaders need empowerment, network, and resources to address the problem once identified. Company leaders need to understand the competitors' strengths and weaknesses, thoroughly understand services offered, market outlook, and customers' expectations. The participant recommended business owners engage in event planning activities with the team, attend the events, and observe. The participant said the leaders need to build a network with other events planning business leaders to share resources and learn. Understanding the business landscape is essential to be a good leader.

### Study Limitation and Recommendations

The study limitation was the participants' openness in their responses in answering the research question. Interviews consisted of follow-up questions to extract rich data. Considering intricate details and types of events planning businesses, the interview questions geared towards leadership building. The study findings revealed a broad view on improving leadership capabilities to address adaptive challenges, whose practicality could extend beyond the events planning business.

The recommendation for leaders is to understand leadership capabilities as it pertains to their business. Women business leaders need to analyze if work has functional challenges or adaptive challenges. The functional challenges can be addressed through existing know-how approach found in the literature and practices in the events industry. If business challenges do not have known solutions, then the recommendation is to view the work from a broad perspective to understand the problem better. Once the problem is apparent, business owners could decide what leadership attributes apply to the current problem and apply them with their acquired experience. The process of systematic implementation constitutes leadership. The study findings revealed building leadership capabilities to address adaptive challenges. Future researchers could focus on functional challenges.

### Conclusion

The female entrepreneur's role is evident in productivity, job creation, and economic growth. However, about 7% of female leaders in SME held leadership positions for 3 to 5 years, and only 13% of female leaders have been in leadership positions for more than ten years (Husain & Xiao, 2016). Sadera et al. (2019) stated in a study finding that women entrepreneurs lacked the necessary leadership skills to excel in their business ventures. The study findings revealed building leadership capabilities to address adaptive challenges. The strategies included combining experience and tools in task execution, learning from past experiences, acquiring leadership attributes, and viewing the work from the balcony to better understand challenges.

### Declarations

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This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, or not-for-profit sectors.

#### Competing Interests

The author declares no competing financial, professional and personal interests.

### Consent for publication

The author declares that he/she consented for the publication of this study.

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***Published Doctoral Study***

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